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WASHINGTON —After ruling out talks with Hamas, the militant Islamist group, the Bush administration is using Egypt as an intermediary to open a channel between Israel and representatives of the group, in what some diplomats say could be a softening of the American stance.

While administration officials still say they do not plan to deal directly with Hamas, the United States has given tacit support to an attempt by Egyptian officials to mediate a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas, which controls Gaza.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice discussed the mediation attempt with President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit in Cairo early this month, and with Prime Minister Ehud Olmert of Israel, administration officials said. Egyptian civilian intelligence officials are the go-betweens, Arab diplomats said.

The effort to mediate a cease-fire between Hamas and Israel is filled with potential pitfalls, Israeli, Egyptian and American officials said. Israel and the United States consider Hamas a terrorist organization and loathe the idea of giving it the legitimacy of mediated talks.

But Israel also wants the rocket attacks from Gaza into Israeli towns and cities to stop. After meeting with Ms. Rice in Jerusalem early this month, Mr. Olmert said Israel would have no need for retaliatory incursions into Gaza if militants there stopped firing rockets across the border. But he stopped short of characterizing his statement as an offer of a cease-fire.

An Arab diplomat involved in the mediation effort likened the shuttling among the parties to social maneuvering in high school. “They want to talk to each other without saying they’ll talk to each other,” he said, adding that it was like “dancing where the two partners won’t come near each other.”

Right now, the official United States policy is to back peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, whose base is limited to the West Bank. As Ms. Rice says she envisions it, those talks would exclude Hamas, because it does not recognize Israel and has refused to renounce violence. If Mr. Abbas and Mr. Olmert reach an accord, it would eventually be put before the Palestinian people, and Hamas would have to decide whether to accept it.

Under that reasoning, Hamas would be under pressure from Arab states, the international community and from within the broader Palestinian population, to accept a pact, renounce violence and make peace with Israel.

The trouble with that approach, many Middle East experts say, is that Hamas has shown that it can disrupt the peace talks before they reach a deal, by lobbing rockets at Israel and prompting it to retaliate. That might lead Mr. Abbas to abandon the talks, which is what occurred two weeks ago when the Palestinian leader withdrew from talks temporarily during Israel's incursion into Gaza.

Bush administration officials are "not yet admitting to themselves that talking to Hamas is the inevitable path that they are walking on," Daniel Levy, a former Israeli negotiator, said. "What has changed is that there is now an appreciation that the security situation with Gaza could kill the peace process."

The Bush administration continues to publicly spurn anything that looks like support for negotiations with Hamas. But increasingly, particularly in the State Department, administration officials have begun debating whether the United States must weigh such talks if it is to realize its hopes of mediating a peace deal.

Early this month, the State Department blog Dipnote posted this provocative query in what it portrayed as its question of the week: Should the United States engage Hamas as part of its efforts to bring about peace between the Israelis and Palestinians? The blog item, written by the department's bureau of public affairs, said, "many argue that the peace process will not be successful until Hamas, a foreign designated terrorist organization, is brought into the discussions."

The response was fast. From “Patricia in California,” “Are you people nuts?”

From “Terry in Colorado,” “The very fact that you are asking this question is troubling.”

And from “U.S. Congressman Mark Kirk in Washington, D.C.,” “Worrying that you guys are asking questions like this using funds approved by the appropriations committee that I am a member of.”

The response from Mr. Kirk, Republican of Illinois, apparently worried the State Department spokesman, Sean McCormack, enough to elicit his own reply, assuring Mr. Kirk that the State Department did not mean anything by it.

“The Question of the Week portion of the blog is meant to allow public comment about questions we at the State Department are asked by the media and others in public fora,” Mr. McCormack wrote in the blog. “The asking of the question is not meant to indicate support for a policy different than that of the government.”

Mr. Kirk said in an interview that asking the question on the blog “undercut the policy of the United States.” He said that while State Department foreign service officials might be debating the issue internally, they were not the ones making policy.

“If that’s where the staff of the State Department wants to go, I urge them to call 1-800-Congress because they will be corrected in short order,” Mr. Kirk said. He said a staff member pointed out the blog item to him, and that from now on “obviously I will be an avid reader of Dipnote.”

But even in Israel, there is growing discussion of whether it is realistic to continue the policy of dealing only with the Palestinian Authority, which is run by Mr. Abbas, and ignoring Hamas, which defeated Mr. Abbas’s Fatah party in Palestinian parliamentary elections and now controls Gaza, where more than a million Palestinians live.

In meetings in Washington last week, the former Israeli foreign minister Shlomo Ben-Ami argued that a negotiated cease-fire with Hamas was the only way that the peace process begun in Annapolis last year had a chance of ending in an agreement this year. “Even though the current administration is not in favor of any dialogue with Hamas, I sense the start of a change in attitude, at least as far as a cease-fire with Hamas is concerned,” he said.